

Testimony by the Honorable Gil Gutknecht

Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment

June 24, 2004

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, good morning and thank you for allowing me to speak before you today on the navigation improvements and ecosystem restoration of the Mississippi River and its importance to the people of Minnesota.

There are multiple uses of the Mississippi River – it is an important natural resource, a place of recreation for thousands of Americans, and an essential transportation link in the national economy.

The Upper Mississippi valley provides habitat for 305 species of birds, 57 species of mammals, 45 species of amphibians and reptiles, and 134 species of fish. There are even bald eagles in the area, which can be seen year-round.

Tundra swans migrate each year from Alaska and northern Canada to the Chesapeake Bay, stopping at the Mississippi River on their trip south. One place they stop is Rieck's Lake, a part of the river, where they stay for a few weeks until the river freezes over. There are sometimes up to 30,000 of these majestic birds along our little slice of the Mississippi. I have visited Rieck's Lake and have enjoyed watching these magnificent creatures.

The Upper Mississippi is a haven for boating, fishing, hunting and other forms of recreation. Locals and tourists alike enjoy year-round fishing for walleye, northern pike, sauger, bass, perch, crappies, sunfish, and catfish up and down the river. On summer days, thousands of private boaters enjoy the river, and hunters enjoy harvesting ducks in the fall.

Our nation's economy is also dependant on the Mississippi river. In 1999, over 151 million tons of commodities moved on the waterways of the river system with a combined value of nearly \$24 billion.

Minnesota alone sent about \$1.4 billion worth of grain down the river –most of it traveled to New Orleans and Baton Rouge for export to foreign markets. About 70 percent of our country's agricultural exports travel along the Mississippi. The Upper Mississippi supports more than 400,000 jobs in manufacturing, agriculture, and shipping – all of which in turn support local businesses.

But the river needs our help to maintain – and improve – its multiple uses. The day-to-day wear and tear on the river has taken its toll. The locks on the Mississippi river were designed for a 50 year life-span and are now over 70 years old. Today's barge traffic is significantly different than when the locks were designed. The dilapidated state of the system coupled with modern barge traffic has caused delays and other problems on the river.

Over time, Rieck's Lake's open water has been reduced by about 90 percent due to erosion, sedimentation, and other developments along the river that have slowed the waters. We need to restore the natural features of Rieck's Lake water resources to enhance the features that attract Tundra Swans and other migratory waterfowl to the lake.

Fortunately, there is light at the end of the tunnel. The Army Corps of Engineers Navigation Study, which has had significant problems over the years, has finally neared completion. The Corps' preferred alternative is a balanced, reasonable approach that will enhance all of our uses for the Upper Mississippi River System. They have put together a plan for lock reconstruction and ecosystem restoration to be completed over the next 50 years to ensure that all of the multiple uses of the river will be maintained and improved.

By improving navigation on the Mississippi, we can reduce traffic on our roadways and reduce pollution. A typical tow of 15 barges down the river can carry as much as 870 semi-trucks with 60 percent less emissions. Unfortunately, the current locks are only 600 feet in length. The length of 15 barges averages about 1,100 feet – so towboats have to drop off half their barges in order to pass through the locks, and then reconnect, and then repeat the procedure upon arriving at the next lock. Building 1,200 foot locks will cut dock time and costs – and those savings are passed on to farmers, manufacturers, and consumers, creating jobs for our economy.

The Corps also proposes billions of dollars to help restore the river's ecosystem to promote wildlife and return the river to its natural cycles. This investment will promote a more natural state for the river, improve wildlife habitat, benefit recreational use, and create a more sustainable system.

While the Corps proposal is a very long-term plan, there are steps that the Committee should take now as Congress works to reauthorize the Water Resources Development Act. I was pleased that yesterday's Senate Committee Mark of the bill included the most critical components for the next 15 years. This will accomplish the most pressing transportation and ecosystem restoration and move us toward improved use of the river.

Provisions relating to the Upper Mississippi River in the bill were largely based on the Corps's Preferred Alternative and S. 2470 introduced by Senator Kit Bond and a Bipartisan group of Senators from along the river. I am working with House Members on companion legislation that will provide significant funding for a balanced approach to the river's multiple uses.

The time to act is now – every day America is losing profits due to the inefficiency of the current navigation system. At the same time we have the chance to invest in our environment and create an improved river ecosystem.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.